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Motifs in Motion: An Iconographic Evaluation of Spiro Engraved Production and Distribution between the Northern and Southern Caddo Areas

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Motifs in Motion: An Iconographic Evaluation of Spiro Engraved Production and Distribution between the Northern and Southern Caddo Areas

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Spiro Engraved, characterized by restricted set of curvilinear motifs, is viewed as one of the ceramic hallmarks of the Early Caddo period (A.D. 950-1150). Spatial variation in Spiro Engraved vessels has been well-documented through various provenance and stylistic studies across the northern and southern Caddo areas. However, almost no analyses of Spiro Engraved vessels have considered variation in motif occurrence and expression between the northern and southern Caddo areas. In this study, I review the most robust and comprehensive sample of Spiro Engraved vessels throughout the Caddo world to understand motif variation within the region. The results show that northern Caddo people may have chosen specific Spiro Engraved motifs to be included as part of their mortuary programs at ceremonial mound sites, while southern Caddo people seemed to have incorporated the full spectrum of Spiro Engraved motifs for domestic, ceremonial, and mortuary purposes.

During the Early Caddo period (A.D. 950-1150), communities reorganized their settlements, used highly ritualized ceramic objects, and constructed several multi-mound ceremonial centers in the Caddo Archaeological Area (Girard et al. 2014). During this time, several mound centers dotted the Caddo landscape. Some of these communities had direct social, economic, and political relationships with emerging Mississippian mound centers to the east, such as Cahokia (11MS2) in the American Bottom (Girard 2009). The widespread distribution of Spiro Engraved ceramic vessels is one of the archaeological hallmarks of this period (Lambert 2019; Pertulla 2017).

Spiro Engraved vessels have been recovered in modest numbers throughout the northern Caddo (Arkansas Basin) and southern Caddo regions (Red River Valley) (Figure 1). However, the contexts in which they were deposited are quite different. The vessels seem to have been restricted within mortuary contexts at northern Caddo ceremonial centers. In contrast, they seem to be quite frequently used in domestic and ceremonial contexts at Southern Caddo mound and village sites (Lambert 2020). Recently, Spiro Engraved wares and their non-representational imagery have been theorized as a microcosm of Caddo views of the natural and supernatural realms (Lambert 2017), as ritualized

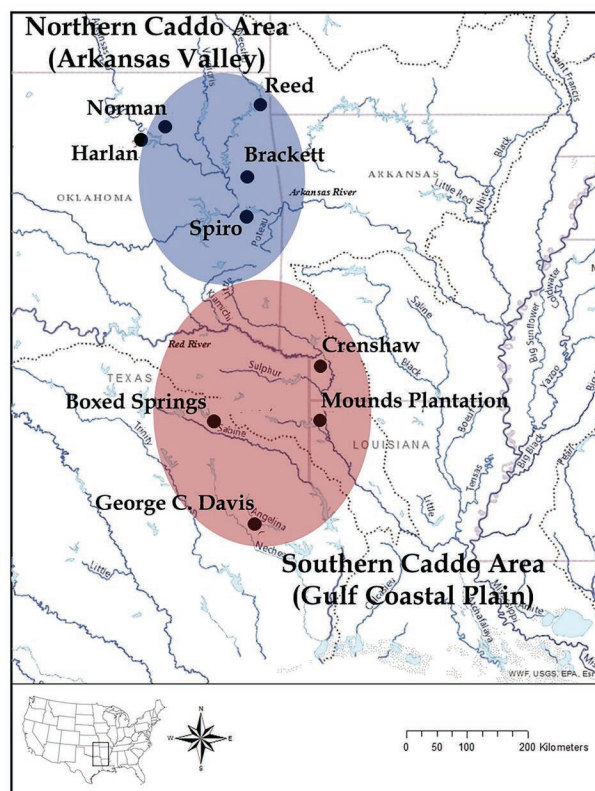


Figure 1. Map of the northern and southern Caddo areas with major ceremonial mound centers.

vessels that functioned as sacred bundles (Nowak 2020), or as containers expressing multiple meanings as they traveled through different itineraries in time and space (Lambert 2020).

Spatial variation in Spiro Engraved vessels has been well-documented through various provenance and stylistic studies across the northern and southern Caddo areas (Lambert 2017; Perttula and Selden 2013). However, almost no analyses of Spiro Engraved vessels have considered variation in motif occurrence and expression between the northern and southern Caddo areas. In this analysis, I review the most robust and comprehensive sample of Spiro Engraved vessels throughout the Caddo world to understand motif variation within the region. The results show that northern Caddo people may have chosen specific Spiro Engraved motifs to be included as part of their mortuary programs at ceremonial mound sites, while southern Caddo people seemed to have incorporated the full spectrum of Spiro Engraved motifs for domestic, ceremonial, and mortuary purposes. I then discuss previous research and interpretations of Spiro Engraved production and distribution to show that Caddo social and ritual practices were much more heterogeneous than previously thought.

Spiro Engraved Type Description and Background

Highly skilled artisans manufactured Spiro Engraved vessels (Figure 2). They were exceptionally well-crafted, built with very thin walls, fine-grained grog temper (crushed sherds from broken vessels), highly burnished surfaces, and intricate abstract engraved motifs, sometimes highlighted with added red or white clay pigments (Girard et al. 2014; Lambert 2017). Only exceptional clay sources would have had the plasticity needed to build such vessels and have them survive the firing process. According to contemporary Caddo potters, the clay sources from which their ancestors made Spiro Engraved vessels were incredibly important places on the landscape, and the pots remained tethered to those places even as they were being made and used (Earles 2012, 2015). Strong social factors of apprenticeship, whereby skilled artisans shared the knowledge of where and how to gather clay to make

Spiro Engraved vessels, preserved their continued circulation for at least 200 years.

Early Caddo potters almost exclusively used grog temper to construct Spiro Engraved vessels. At the same time, however, Mississippi River Valley groups to the east began to use mussel shell temper in their finely made pots. The use of grog was a long-held tradition of Caddo potters that extends back in time to their Woodland ancestors (Schambach 1982). The continued use of grog temper (and perhaps the locations of clay sources), at a time when most emerging Mississippian groups began to use shell, may indicate the importance of maintaining connections to earlier people and places. In this sense, Spiro Engraved pots extend further back in time before their context of production, which prevents treating the vessels as being discontinuous from their past. While Spiro Engraved ceramics are often linked to the Early Caddo period, some have shown up in later contexts at Spiro's Great Mortuary (Brown 1996), venerable heirloom objects that were (re)used to recall a more traditional past (Lambert 2018).



Figure 2. Example of a Spiro Engraved bottle from the Spiro site (34LF40), currently housed at the Sam Noble Museum of Natural History.

Potters displayed Spiro Engraved motifs on a variety of vessel forms, including bottles, bowls, beakers, seed jars, and compound vessels (Early 2012; Perttula 2013). On average, bottles make up around 80% of northern Caddo assemblages, while the distribution of vessel forms are more evenly distributed in the southern Caddo area (see Lambert 2017:209-218). The different vessel forms had specific functions and likely influenced the itineraries of the vessels, namely how they circulated in and out of places and the contexts in which they were used. As different Spiro Engraved forms encountered various people, places, and non-human objects, this may have transformed their meanings. Early Caddo bottles usually had a globular body with a long-tapered neck with a narrow opening, best used for holding liquids. Why was the bottle form used as the primary medium on which Spiro Engraved motifs were adorned in the northern Caddo area? The bottle form, its liquid contents, and iconographic meaning are likely linked, but more investigations of Spiro Engraved bottles, in particular organic residue analyses, need to be performed before we can be certain of this association.

Potters used a very limited set of design choices to create the overall repeated motifs around Spiro Engraved vessels (Lambert 2017). The central design motifs, repeated multiple times around the vessel, are comprised of either concentric circles or single or double spiral elements. In most cases, primary design motifs were separated by vertical or diagonal border panels around the vessels. A series of horizontal engraved lines were executed above and below the primary design motifs, usually just above the base and under the rim or bottle neck of the vessels. In my dissertation research, I compared the stylistic variation of Spiro Engraved vessels across the Caddo region using Early's (2012) design grammar and stylistic variation analysis and argued very few potters had the knowledge and skill to produce Spiro Engraved designs (Lambert 2017). Potters paid extra attention to the symmetry of the motifs, spacing of the engraved lines, and to learning the exact sequence of design elements: how each engraved line was placed on the surface of the vessels. Minute variations in Spiro Engraved motifs may indicate different potters learning the craft over time or closely connected potting communities making the same vessels at the same time. Early Caddo potters were thus not only

concerned with teaching the overall design, but it was also the exact order the designs should be made, which implies personal tutelage in designing and decorating the pots.

Previous Interpretations of Spiro Engraved

The archaeology of Early Caddo fine wares has often been regarded as indicative of a more homogenous ritual landscape (Girard et al. 2014) and their interpretive value has not progressed much beyond defining distinct cultural groupings. Girard (2009:57) suggested early fine ware vessels were important display items and "were limited to specific groups within communities... probably involving feasts or ritual consumption of food." Perttula and Ferguson (2010) have shown that early fine wares were important items of exchange among distant Caddo communities and other groups in the eastern Woodlands and Plains. Girard and colleagues (2014:54-55) proposed that early fine wares served as accoutrements of wealth, power, and status, and became important exchange items among emerging elites who not only resided within the Caddo Area, but also at Cahokia in the American Bottom during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Caddo archaeologists primarily used Spiro Engraved and other Early Caddo pottery types as temporally diagnostic objects without further investigating differences in iconography, style, contexts, use, and iconographic meaning between socially diverse areas of the Caddo. This led to the assumption that potters locally manufactured Spiro Engraved pottery throughout the Caddo area. If potters living at sites across the northern and southern Caddo areas all had the knowledge and skill to produce identical vessels and motifs, then it could be argued that the meaning of Spiro Engraved motifs was fixed or "emblematic" (e.g., Weissner 1983:257) and that they sent clear messages about Early Caddo identity (Girard et al. 2014). However, new research has shown considerable diversity in the production and use of Spiro Engraved pottery (Lambert 2021). I agree with Girard and colleagues (2014:57) that Early Caddo people circulated engraved wares across different Caddo contexts to communicate and establish connections with multiple communities in distant geographical regions. What is

needed now is a discussion of recent Spiro Engraved provenance studies to understand geographically where Spiro Engraved pottery was manufactured.

Spiro Engraved Provenance Studies

Wherever Spiro Engraved pots traveled, they carried with them the geochemical signature of the clay as a residue of the place from where they were produced. Caddo archaeologists have undertaken extensive chemical compositional research to understand where Early Caddo vessels were made (Lambert 2017, 2019; Perttula and Ferguson 2010; Selden 2013; Selden et al. 2014). A recent and extensive instrumental neutron activation analysis (INAA) of Early Caddo fine wares was done to determine whether they were made in the northern and/or southern Caddo areas (Lambert 2017, 2019). The findings revealed that none of the sourced Early Caddo fine wares, including Spiro Engraved, were made in the northern Caddo area. All appear to have been produced by potters in the southern Caddo area. Precise production locales could not be determined due to the homogeneity of the clays in the southern Caddo area; however, my study concluded that Spiro Engraved vessels were most likely made by very few potters in the Red River valley, which corresponds exactly to the highest density locales.

As products of potters in southern Caddo contexts, possibly along the Great Bend of the Red River, the itineraries of the containers and how they traveled to different areas are completely transformed. The movement of Spiro Engraved pots can be tracked beyond the initial moments of production. Accordingly, new meanings became embedded as they circulated, entered diverse kinds of human and object relations, and consequently were transformed across the Caddo area. The circulation of Spiro Engraved vessels from any one clay resource does not simply refer to a origin point of production. The movement of clay from its source to the pottery workshop to a succession of people who used Spiro Engraved containers in completely different ways constituted dynamic social, political, and religious relations as these objects encountered different people, places, and things. After potters dug clay from a source, perhaps near the Crenshaw site (3MI6), they may have been used it to hand-coil Spiro Engraved bottles destined for northern Caddo ceremonial centers.

As a bottle with locally realized motifs and meanings was transported from Crenshaw, it accrued a history of circulation and significance as a distant object. This may have also transformed the meaning of Spiro Engraved motifs. Objects are “detachable from any one context ... as they move from place to place and from person to person” (Joyce 2015:29). Thus, the meanings of Spiro Engraved motifs may have become detached from their place of origin as they encountered and became part of multiple networks.

Methods

My dissertation and documentary research allowed me to assemble one of the most comprehensive sample of Spiro Engraved motifs across both Caddo areas. Overall, there are approximately 184 sites across the Caddo landscape where Spiro Engraved vessels have been recovered (Lambert 2017:325-328). To conduct the motif analysis, I utilized available site reports, dissertations, theses, book chapters, and journal articles containing any documentary information of Spiro Engraved examples in the form of sherds or whole vessels. From the data recovered, I made a Kernel Point Density plot of the weighted distribution of Spiro Engraved vessels across the northern and southern Caddo areas (Figure 3). While not the most accurate method to study motifs, I examined photographs, illustrations, and associated descriptions of Spiro Engraved motifs from these sources. However, many of the specimens were directly observed for my dissertation research. Motif occurrences were not simply recorded as they were described in each primary source. Instead, each motif was reanalyzed based upon the hierarchical classification discussed below. Photographs and illustrations were cross-checked with written descriptions and sent to colleagues in order to obtain the most accurate classifications.

Motif classification was successful when there was at least 40% of the motif observable on the ceramic fragments. Usually a sherd displayed only a portion of a single motif. In these cases, they were successfully classified when a portion of the central area of the motif was present. In most instances, this is the only way to distinguish concentric circles from spiral motifs. Confidence in classifying sherds was also strengthened

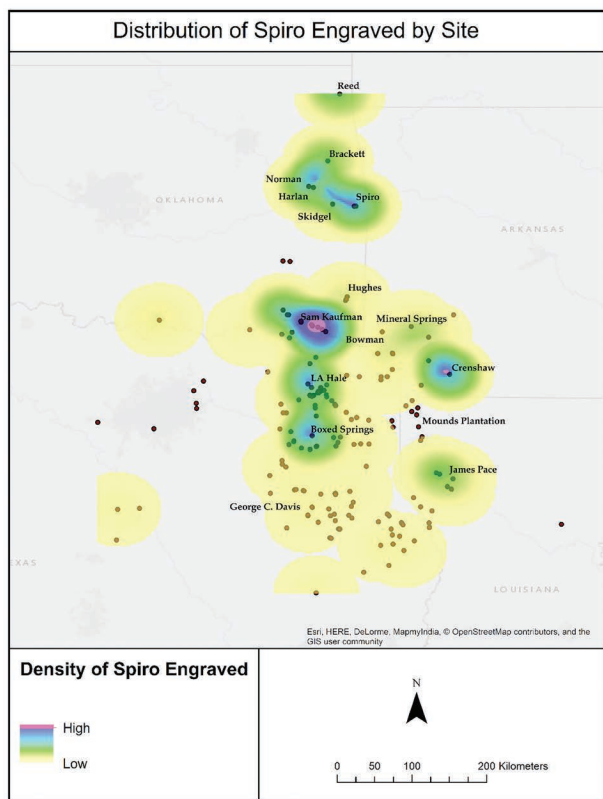


Figure 3. Kernel Point Density plot of Spiro Engraved vessels. The unlabeled red points in the southern Caddo area represent domestic sites in which Spiro Engraved vessels were recovered.

when comparing partial motifs with the large corpus of whole vessels I documented from my dissertation research. The same motif was usually repeated two to four times around a single vessel but was only calculated once per whole vessel or large sherd to decrease the chances of over-representing certain motifs over others. Potters had very strict rules for designing Spiro Engraved vessels and did not adorn different motifs on a single vessel, which made this analysis much more straightforward and consistent.

Motif Classification Structure

The primary motifs identified were organized according to a hierarchical stylistic analysis (Plog 2008) and a design grammar analysis (Early 2012) to understand the variation and the degree of design choice, organization, construction, and overall regional variability between northern and southern Caddo ceremonial centers (Figure 4). A hierarchical stylistic analysis is conducted by first determining the variation of primary design motifs across a ceramic type. Plog (2008:48) defined these as “primary decorative elements” that are painted or applied first on a vessel. Then, the primary motifs are broken down into their individual attributes to understand secondary and tertiary decorative elements that are placed on the vessel after the placement of the primary motif. Thus, this method of motif classification

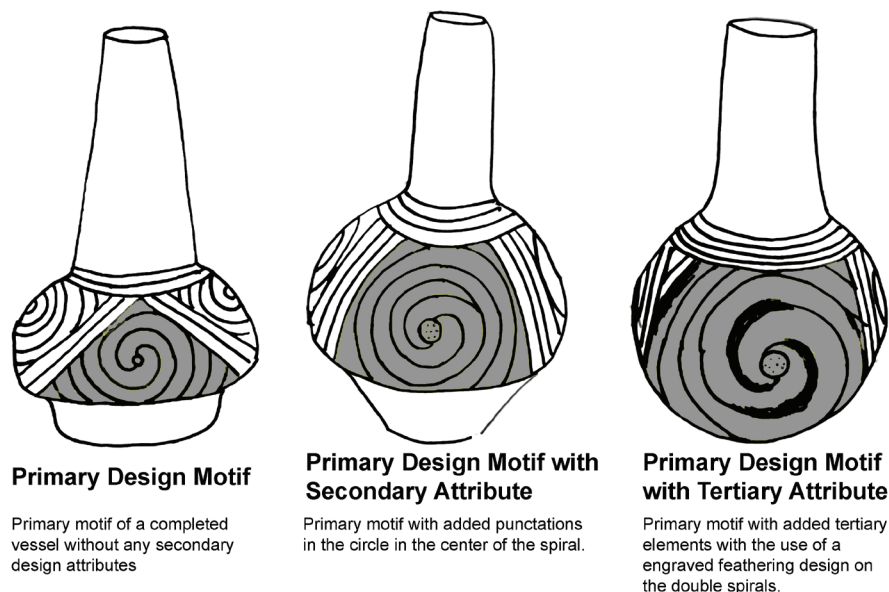


Figure 4. Primary design motif and secondary and tertiary design attributes.

documents the variation in the overall design structure and secondary and tertiary design elements, which can reveal the variation between individual or a community of potters. Spiro Engraved motifs were chosen based on their geometric or symmetrical criteria. Once motif variation is understood in different Caddo contexts, motifs can be classified based on their potential symbolic meanings.

To understand the style of Early Caddo fine wares, I first developed a method I call “design stratigraphy” to analyze the depth and overlap of lines to reveal the sequence of design construction (Figure 5). From there, I was able to reconstruct the sequence of steps of each Spiro Engraved vessel to understand design pathway variability that suggests potters placed Spiro Engraved design elements in the same order (Figure 6). This suggests Early Caddo potters were not only concerned with copying the overall design, but that it was also important to learn the exact order in which the designs should be placed, implying personal tutelage in designing the pots. Although the sequential order seems like the most efficient way to lay out each motif, research has shown there is significant variation in ceramic design layout in post A.D. 1200 Caddo contexts (Early 2012; Girard et al. 2014).

The hierarchical stylistic analysis showed that Spiro Engraved vessels had a very limited set of design choices from which potters could choose to complete a vessel. I produced a hierarchical tree diagram for Spiro Engraved vessels to visually display the range of

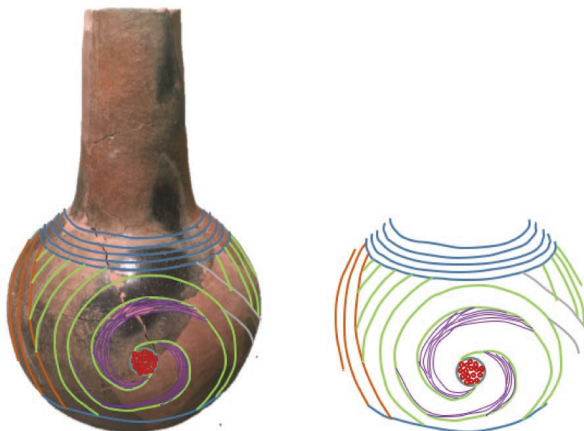


Figure 5. Example of the Design Stratigraphy process showing how Early Caddo fine ware lines overlap in the motif. Step 1 (blue lines), Step 2 (green lines), Step 3 (purple lines), and Step 4 (red circle punctate).

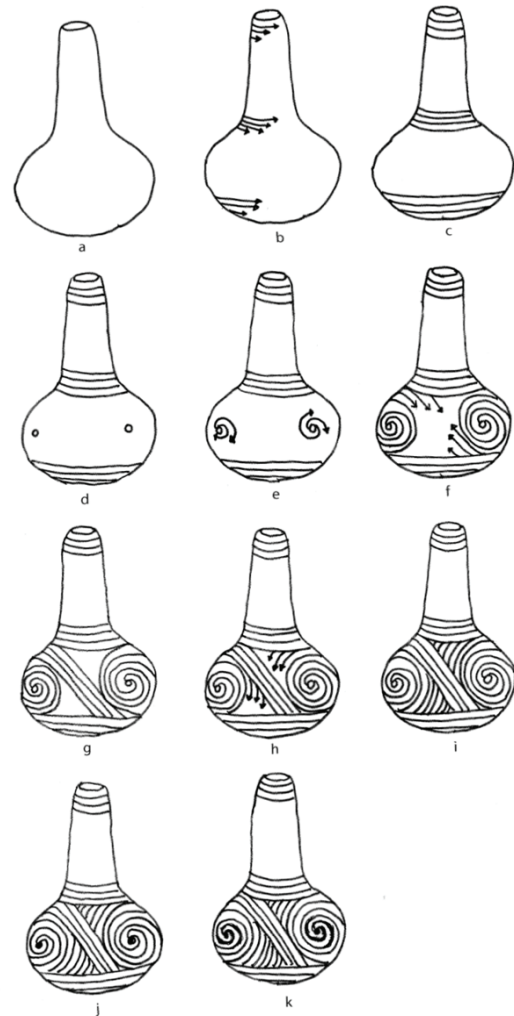


Figure 6. Overall design pathways to create a Spiro Engraved motif.

stylistic variability (Figure 7). Each element added onto the primary forms are considered secondary or tertiary elements. For Spiro Engraved vessels, there are only five primary motif forms, all of which are stylistically related to one another. It seems that Early Caddo potters were restricted to only three secondary design choices, included excising, feathering, and punctating. This is true for fine wares at both northern and southern Caddo ceremonial centers. In fact, during my dissertation research, I repeatedly found identical Spiro Engraved motifs and vessel forms in both Caddo regions, although most are from southern Caddo ceremonial centers. If several potters were making these vessels throughout the entire Caddo region, we would expect much more stylistic variation than is shown here. These findings are in concert with the INAA results and indicate the

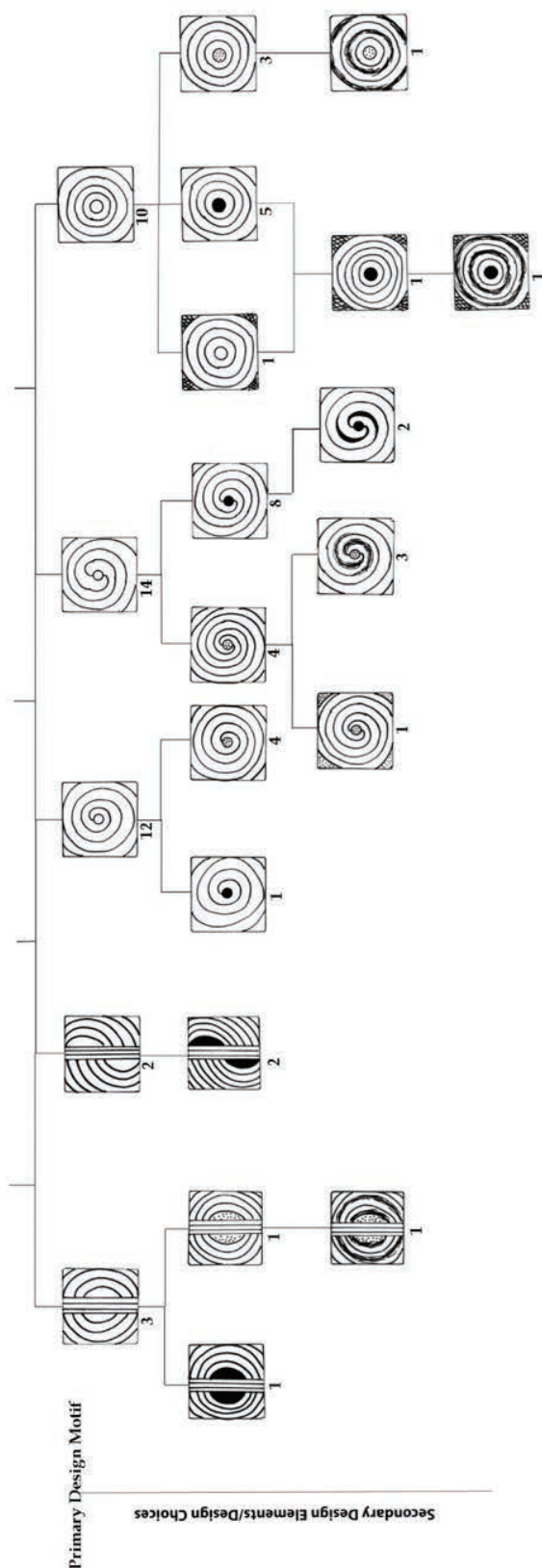


Figure 7. Spiro Engraved Hierarchical Tree Diagram showing the limited number of design choices.

emergence of ceramic specialization in the southern Caddo Area involving only a few craft specialists.

For this motif analysis, there are five primary motif forms: single spirals (S1); double spirals (S2); concentric circles (C1); and two variants of bifurcated concentric circles (C2) (Figure 8). The primary motif forms were also based on the principle of visual symmetry (see Azar 2019; Frieberg 2018; Pauketat and Emerson 1991). Within the motif categories S1-C2, there are secondary design elements added to each primary form. While it is possible that the secondary design elements may change the symbolic meaning of the primary motifs for different Caddo communities, they are considered here as variations of the overall theme and thus all motifs were analyzed by their primary forms. These secondary elements may have spatial and/or temporal meaning and much more work is needed to understand their distribution across the Caddo world.

Results

The results of the motif analysis reveal some striking patterns between the southern and northern Caddo areas and motif choice between domestic and burial

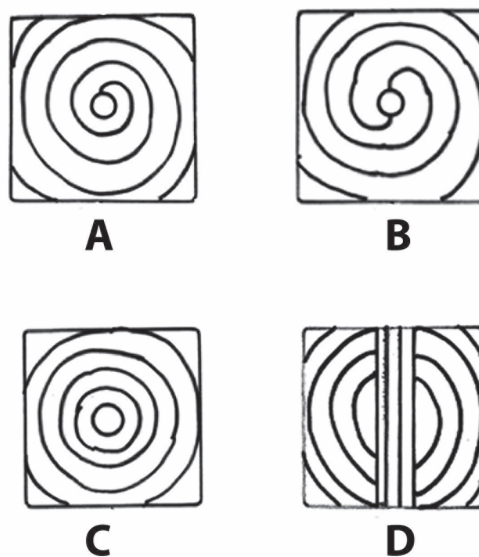


Figure 8. Spiro Engraved primary design motifs: *a*, single spiral, labeled as S1; *b*, double spiral, labeled as S2; *c*, concentric circles, labeled as C1; and *d*, bifurcated concentric circles, labeled as C2. Note that there are two variants of bifurcated circles, which yielded a total of five primary design forms.

contexts in the southern Caddo region (Table 1). When comparing burial contexts, the double spiral motif (S2) and single spiral motifs (S1) are the most popular motifs in the northern Caddo area, and the double spiral motif is by far the most favored on bottles and bowls (Figure 9). Approximately 80% (n=52) of the motifs used in mortuary contexts at northern Caddo ceremonial mound centers is the double spiral. There does not seem to be any statistically significant variation between the four primary motif forms in the southern Caddo region. As shown, when considering the study area as a whole, it is indeed the case that the mean distribution of the double spiral motif in the northern Caddo area tends to be significantly favored over the other motifs. There is a strong and statistically significant difference in motif choice in the northern Caddo area ($\chi^2 = 113.20$, $df = 4$, $p < 0.0001$). Another general assessment of the data when looking at the southern Caddo area suggests that the mean distribution is much more evenly distributed and thus there are no real patterned relationships between motif frequencies in burial contexts. Thus, the distribution of motifs in the southern Caddo region are

Table 1. Spiro Engraved Motif Distribution between the Northern and Southern Caddo Areas.

Spiro Engraved Motif Classification	Northern Caddo	Southern Caddo
S1 (Single Spiral)	9	37
S2 (Double Spiral)	52	126
C1 (Concentric Circles)	12	103
C2 (Bifurcated Concentric Circles)	1	8
Total	74	274

not statistically significantly different ($t = -0.73$, $df = 45$, $p = 0.471$).

When comparing motif variation between burial and domestic contexts in the southern Caddo region another interesting pattern emerges (Figure 10). Double spiral and concentric circle motifs are the most favored in burial contexts, but the motifs in domestic contexts appear to be more restricted. Over 95% of the Spiro Engraved vessels in domestic contexts have the concentric circles motif. Also, bifurcated concentric circle motifs in southern Caddo contexts are only present in burial contexts. This motif is the most uncommon in the Spiro Engraved assemblage. It is important to note here that Spiro Engraved motifs

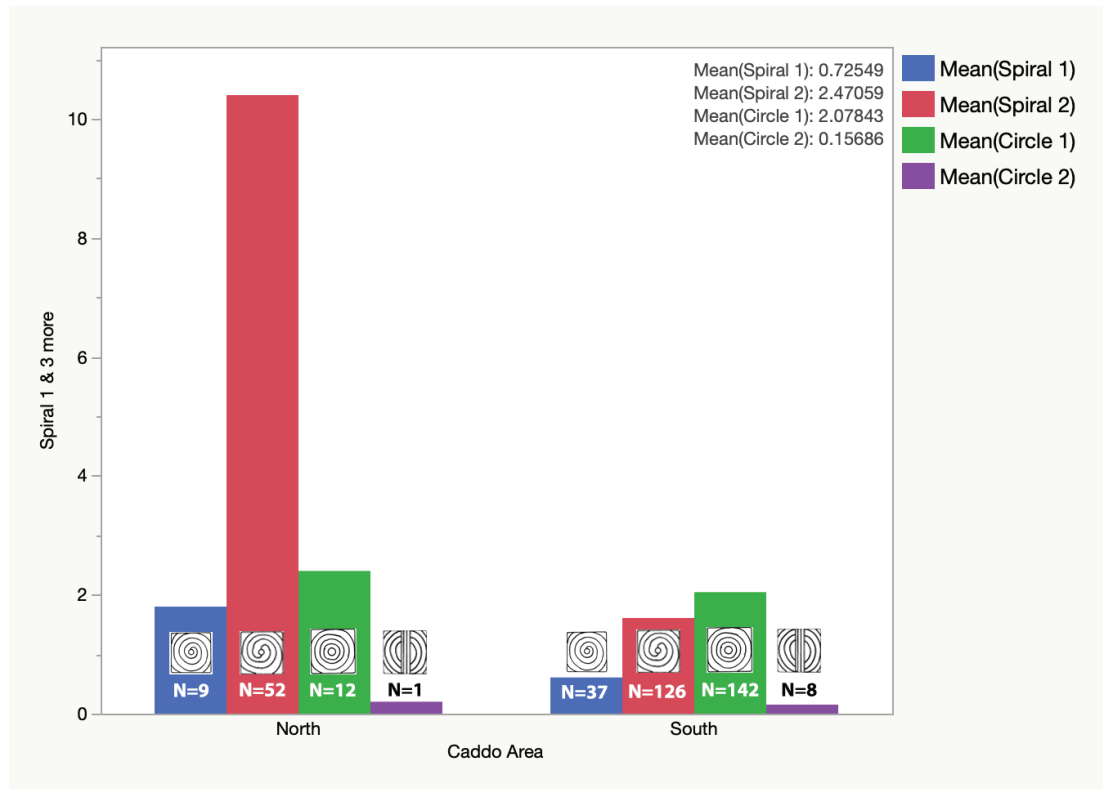


Figure 9. Mean Distribution Histogram showing the variations of motif distribution between the northern and southern Caddo area.

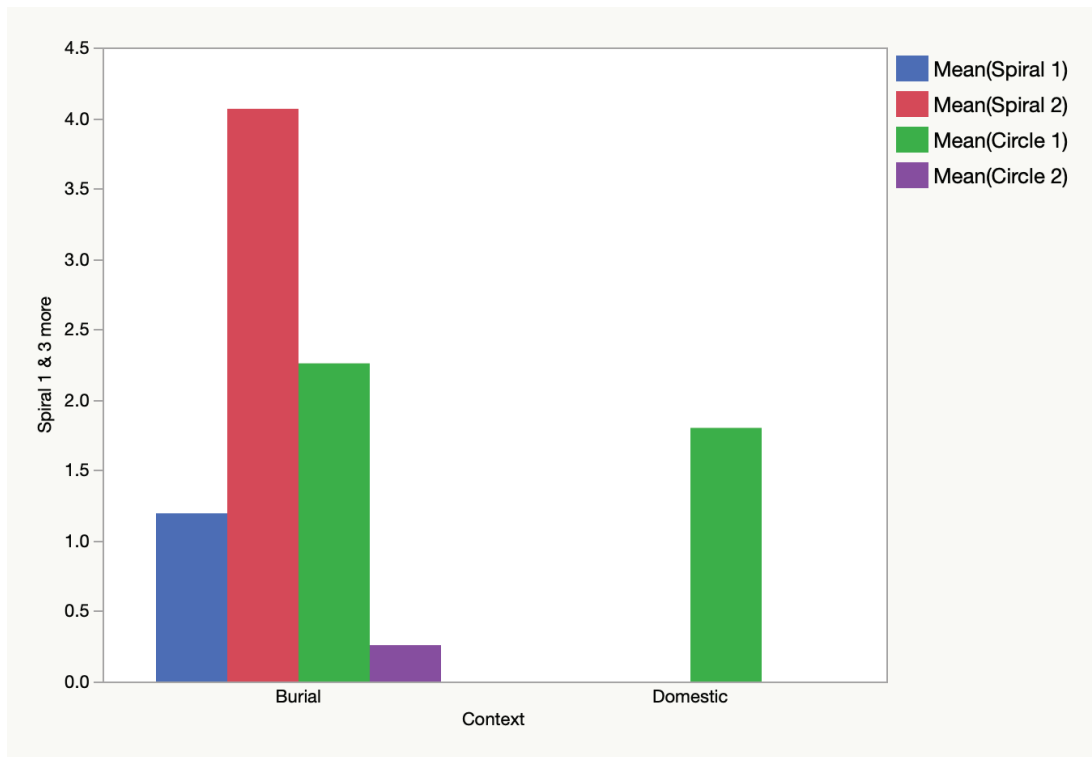


Figure 10. Mean distribution histogram showing the variation of motif distribution between burial and domestic contexts in the southern Caddo region.

were highly fragmentary in southern Caddo domestic contexts, and thus this pattern could be the result of sample bias. When considering motif variation between burial and domestic contexts in the southern Caddo area, the concentric circle motif (C1) seems to be favored in domestic contexts. There is not enough data in domestic contexts to observe the significance statistically, but it is worth noting, nonetheless. Overall, this suggests that regional patterns of motif frequencies in burial contexts are more likely related to distinct cultural notions of which motif was to be used for burial accompaniments.

Discussion

These patterns of variation of Spiro Engraved pottery provide new insight into the complex nature of interaction and motif preference between northern and southern Caddo communities. It also highlights how the distribution of local and nonlocal pottery has a direct influence on local and nonlocal ideas, values, and practices, and thus allows us to understand the Caddo, not as a homogenous cultural group, but as complex communal actors who constantly defined,

communicated, and structured their own identities through the use of Spiro Engraved and other types of pottery. Spiro Engraved motifs in the northern and southern Caddo areas may indicate the scales at which local and nonlocal choice signals cultural similarity and difference in mortuary, ceremonial, and domestic contexts where these vessels were used and exchanged.

Centralized Production and Ritual Multivocality

I argue that there is provenance and stylistic evidence for the centralized production of Spiro Engraved and other Early Caddo ceramics in the southern Caddo region and then distributed north to ceremonial centers where they were deposited in burials. In previous work, I have shown that not only were Spiro Engraved vessels made by southern Caddo potters, but also suggested that the production of Early Caddo engraved wares represents the development of at least part-time craft specialization and a long-distance distribution system (Lambert 2020). Thus, it appears that the knowledge, ability, or right to craft Spiro Engraved pottery were reserved for a smaller, perhaps more localized, group(s) of ritual craft specialists.

The results of the motif analysis also suggest that northern Caddo people might have actively communicated to southern Caddo people what motifs were necessary for their mortuary practices. This motif preference for reversing spirals supports the interpretation that Spiro Engraved was an ideological tool that (1) reflected a widely shared iconographic tradition and (2) was used and perceived differently between northern and southern Caddo. The question still remains: was centralized production and specific motif preferences an ideological tool used to legitimize ritual prestige, power, or authority? The variation in production, use, deposition, and motif distribution of Spiro Engraved wares does not suggest a single dominant ideology, but rather a ritual multivocality established and maintained by different Caddo groups.

Specifically, the iconography of Spiro Engraved vessels could have served as a visual and symbolic vehicle through which Caddo people conceived and interacted differently within a broadly shared Caddo religious system. The act of people in the northern Caddo area choosing one motif over others may have been a way to broadcast to the larger Caddo world who they were in relation to other neighboring communities. In this sense, it is possible that northern Caddo people had divergent negotiations of Caddo religion and what it was “to be Caddo.” The presence of spiral motifs in northern Caddo mortuary contexts suggests a divergence in meaning. Conversely, in the southern Caddo area, potters and owners of Spiro Engraved vessels freely utilized all motifs in many different contexts, perhaps as a medium to project and maintain their conceptions of Caddo identity. The development of these divergent histories and traditions may have ignited the explosion of spatially distinct Caddo pottery types in the Middle and Late Caddo periods (Early 2012; Girard et al. 2014). “It further illustrates that people can emulate the cultural practices of a dominant polity, but in the end they do so with regard to their own local traditions” (Frieberg 2018:50).

As Spiro Engraved wares moved through different contexts, they become what Joyce (2012:29) called “detached” from their original contexts. As a result, meanings and agencies are altered as they move and interact with different people, places, and things. As Spiro Engraved vessels moved through time and space,

they form individual social lives. Appadurai (1986) called this the social lives of things and asserted that objects are born, get altered, and are buried – similar to the life and death of humans. I argue that the meanings of Spiro Engraved vessels were transformed as they moved between different Caddo contexts. The social lives of Spiro Engraved wares evolved as they became detached from where they were created, travelled to northern Caddo ceremonial centers, and eventually were used and deposited in mortuary contexts.

Why Spiral Motifs?

Since northern Caddo people preferred spiral motifs on Spiro Engraved vessels for mortuary contexts at ceremonial mound sites, it is worth trying to understand the possible meanings of the motif. I view Spiro Engraved motifs as a material and symbolic medium through which meaning was reaffirmed by local histories, practices, and traditions. These entanglements between object, motif, people, and place are rooted in the concept of materiality, which emphasizes not only the object itself but also how materials are continually being reshaped and given agency as humans and nonhumans engage with them (Costin 2005; Culley 2008; Emerson and Pauketat 2008; Fogelin 2007; Miller 2005). Objects and humans have a relational dependency on one another: things rely on humans for their creation, maintenance and deposition, and humans rely on things to give meaning and structure to the symbolic and material worlds (Knappett and Malafouris 2008). The meaning of Spiro Engraved is thus malleable, dynamic, and historically contingent and can change as they encounter new people, places, and other objects (Latour 2005; Meskell 2005).

Archaeologists have previously tried to understand the meaning of the spiral motif on different media and within different cultural and historical contexts. Kozuch (2013) explored the meaning of several Mississippian period (A.D. 1200 – 1400) ceramic effigies of marine shell cups from Illinois. She posited that the ceramics represented whelk shell cups and were imbued with cosmological meaning of death using concepts of directionality and were important instruments used in purification rituals. Emerson (1989) has associated the center spiral motifs on Ramey Incised vessels from Illinois with the movement of

dance that signified the balance between the Upper and Under Worlds. Other Ramey Incised spiral motifs may have represented the serpent of the watery Under World (Pauketat and Emerson 1991). Marquardt and Kozuch (2016) posited that spiral motifs may represent humans' passage from birth to death and beyond to the cosmological universe. This symbolic spiraling path from life – death – afterlife parallels several southeastern Native American spiritualities of a serpent-like creature that can cross between the Upper and Lower Worlds. Marquardt and Kozuch (2016) also discuss the directionality of spiral whelk shells and suggest that clockwise and counterclockwise spirals may have had related but altering meanings. In their ethnohistorical and ethnographic research, clockwise (sinistral) spirals were associated with the cycle of the sun, fire, life, and death. Counterclockwise (dextral) spiral motifs may have been direct paths toward life, rebirth, and reincarnation. Spirals were thus metaphors for the movement and continuity of time with referents to birth, death, and rebirth (Lankford 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). This is perhaps why northern Caddo people chose specific motifs with these symbolic qualities for their mortuary traditions. The transformative power of Spiro Engraved spiral motifs in northern Caddo contexts could also have been drawn from their distant production locales. Helms (1988, 1993) emphasized that the power of ceramics used in ritual, mortuary, and ceremonial contexts came from their intrinsic qualities (e.g., their iconography, shape, and color) and/or their distant sources. These nonlocal vessels thus could be used to commune with local cosmologies and important mortuary practices. I am not suggesting that northern Caddo people conceived their cosmologies in the same way or had the same stories, legends, or cosmological understandings as other southeastern indigenous groups. There may have been a broad understanding of these motifs, and each community utilized them in specific contexts that had subtle variations of meaning. Archaeologists now realize the widespread distribution of identical motifs on ceramic vessels do not represent a widespread adoption of a singular Mississippian worldview. Frieberg (2018) conducted an iconographic analysis of Ramey Incised pottery across the Lower and Central Illinois River Valleys and showed that motif variation was reinterpreted based on local understanding

and history. Azar (2019) did a more robust iconographic analysis of Ramey Incised ceramics and proposed that variation in motif design reflects local stylistic experimentation based on local traditions and histories. As Spiro Engraved motifs moved across the landscape, their meanings were not static but had the potential to be transformed as they crossed different cultural contexts. Variation in meaning reflects the various entanglements between people, places, and things (Meskell 2005). I argue that during various acts of Spiro Engraved production, use, exchange, gifting, and ritual practices, northern and southern Caddo people symbolically and physically experienced their cosmologies differently.

Conclusions

This study shows that northern Caddo communities actively chose specific Spiro Engraved motifs to be used in mortuary contexts. In this way, northern Caddo people are seen as active agents during the moments of trade and exchange of Spiro Engraved vessels from their southern Caddo neighbors. Recent chemical, stylistic, and iconographic investigations have provided better insights into Spiro Engraved histories, and their production, use, and movement across diverse areas of the precolumbian Caddo world. The meaning of Spiro Engraved vessels was further reshaped by the various ways in which they were used. When placed in this context, they become appropriated pieces of the past “that are transformed into relevant symbols in the present” (Wallis 2015:201).

In sum, this analysis constitutes a new approach to the systematic evaluation of variation in Spiro Engraved motifs between the northern and southern Caddo area. This examination suggests that northern Caddo people negotiated the movement of Spiro Engraved vessels in different ways that fit within their own local practices, traditions, and histories. Specifically, northern Caddo people selectively chose spiral motifs that they reconceptualized and made meaningful in reference to northern Caddo mortuary traditions. While more work is needed to understand these differences more fully, the motif variation between the two Caddo areas suggests differences in the perceived composition and structure of the cosmos. It reveals the complex connections of local worldviews

in the constant negotiation of a broader Caddo religious identity. More attention should be paid to the subtle iconographic heterogeneity existing between different areas of the Caddo world. We have conceptualized Early Caddo iconography too broadly, discounting noticeable variation as irrelevant background noise. In this analysis and in previous research, I have highlighted these formerly overlooked elements of Early Caddo iconography, interpreting them not as evidence of cultural homogeneity but as a dynamic process of multi-vocality. Ultimately, I believe this type of research will continue to refine our understanding of the Caddo emergence and their relationships to Mississippian groups to the east.

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